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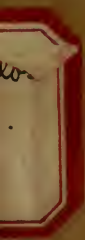


GROWTH THROUGH OBEDIENCE.

JULIUS H. SEELYE.

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BACCALAUREATE SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE CHURCH OF AMHERST COLLEGE,
JUNE 24, 1883.

BY

JULIUS H. SEELYE,

PRESIDENT OF THE COLLEGE.



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PUBLISHERS' NOTE.



The attention attracted to this discourse by the abridged reports in the newspapers, and also the expressed wish of the principal of a large and important school for boys that a copy might be placed in the hands of each one of his pupils, have led to its publication in the present form.

GROWTH THROUGH OBEDIENCE.



“And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart.

“And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” — Luke 2: 51, 52.

THE subjection to his parents of the holy child Jesus must have been quite complete. We know what unquestioning obedience to parental authority was exacted in a well-ordered Jewish household, and this must have been rendered by him who “took not on him the nature of angels but the seed of Abraham,” and was “made in all things like unto his brethren.” It would seem from Mark 6: 3, where, after he had begun his public life, the people of his own country, astonished at his wisdom and his mighty works, said, “Is not this the carpenter?” that he actually wrought at the trade of Joseph, and that he was, as it behoved him to be, obedient in all things. He was the Son of God, truly divine, but he was also truly human, and as a human child he could be only partially and vaguely, if at all, conscious of his endowment and his destiny. The full truth of what he was and what he was to do could only dawn upon him gradually, but the increasing light came as he steadily yielded his will to

lawful authority in his earliest life. He increased in wisdom as well as age, and in favor with God and man, as he was subject to his parents. He became fitted for his public ministry, conscious of his calling and ready for its fulfilment, by his obedience. "The heir so long as he is a child differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all." "Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him."

Growth through obedience; perfection of character and success in the work of life, through submission to authority. Is there any theme which could have a grander illustration, or whose application would seem more timely?

1. It might be called an educational commonplace, so true that it is almost a truism, that growth in knowledge can only come from obedience. Whether in the workings of the human mind knowledge precedes belief, or belief comes before knowledge, is a question long debated and never answered with universal satisfaction. But there has never been any dispute that progress in knowledge can only begin or be carried forward on the basis of a steady faith. The first stage of advancing knowledge is a step towards the unknown which we should never take, which we never could take, but by some sort of faith that the unknown might become the known. Every enlargement of the boundaries of science has been preceded and impelled by the belief that they could be enlarged. The conceited man who does not believe in any attainments

beyond his own, the agnostic who has no faith in any possible knowledge, will neither grow in knowledge nor teach others to grow. In every path of science, we have to walk, if we make any progress, by faith and not by sight; but this faith is in reality an act of will, an obedience which the mind, in its true self-determination, renders to a true law.

In early childhood the fairest promise of knowledge is in the child's docility and reverence and consciousness of his ignorance. "His bashfulness in youth," says Xenophon of Cyrus, "was the very true sign of his virtue and stoutness afterwards." Quickness to learn is far from being the best promise of great learning. A willingness to learn, a self-renouncing willingness, conscious of its own weakness, and confident in another's strength, is the light and life of learning. The saying of Isocrates, worthily set to shine in the new and beautiful windows in the reading-room of our Library, expresses just this thought: "The lover of learning will be the possessor of learning."

A wise teacher will not teach without rules, and to these a pupil who would be wise will diligently conform. The wisest teacher will see that all his rules are grounded in wisdom, and he insists upon their application only to make his pupils wise. Their wisdom only comes from conformity to wise rules. Of course there is liability to exaggeration here. Because a teacher sees that rules are indispensable to a pupil's growth in wisdom, he may come to rest on these as though they were all-sufficient.

in which case the rules become to the pupil's growth, a hindrance rather than a help; and because a pupil sometimes finds that rules laid down for him are arbitrary, grounded in the teacher's individual will and not in right reason, he may come to look on all rules as lacking in reason, and determine to follow his own bent in everything, in which case the imperiousness of the master finds its most marked result in the indolence and ignorance of the pupil. But notwithstanding these mistakes it will ever be true that a manly independence only comes from a manly dependence, a manly reliance upon others being the constant prerequisite to a manly reliance upon one's self.

I say this will ever be true, for it is just as marked in the later growth of knowledge as in the earlier. The farthest advance of thought is in the most perfect subjection of one's thinking to the truth. The truth does not depend upon one's opinions. It is not changed in any respect by the views respecting it which men may entertain. The truth is a supreme reality to which every wise man has submitted, and to which every wise opinion does conform. The old sophists made the individual man the measure of everything, and the individual thinking the true criterion of the truth; but the wiser Socrates made man,—not a man, nor men, not even the wise man, but mankind,—not the thought of an individual, but thought itself, the universal thought, to be the all-conditioning law. And the wise man with Socrates was not he who thought himself wise, but he

who thought as wisdom directed, who did not undertake to direct his own thoughts, but who received a guidance and followed a light not his own.

He is the freeman whom the truth makes free,
And all are slaves besides.

In so far as a man's views of truth are tinged by his self-conceit or self-will, though this may be in never so small a degree, yet in that degree he has failed to know the truth. The first requisite to clear and full knowledge is the humbling of one's pride, the willing recognition of a superior, the ready obedience to the authority of the truth. If any man wills to do the divine will he shall know the divine doctrine.

I hold it to be a good promise always when a child or a man is filled with admiration for some one wiser, nobler, purer than himself, for "admiration," says Bacon, "is the seed of wisdom;" and it is always one of the saddest signs when a man despises men, looking down on others with contempt and constant condemnation, for "the scorner," says Solomon, "seeketh wisdom and findeth it not." "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world," and he who would follow the Son of God unto the gaining of His treasures of wisdom and knowledge, will submit himself first of all so completely to the judgment of God that he will have no disposition to set himself up as a judge of men. "Let no man deceive himself," says Paul. "If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool that he may be wise."

2. If knowledge is power, and growth in knowledge is only gained through obedience, then power is only possessed by the obedient will. But this is true on other grounds and in a larger sense. In the lowest range of power — power over nature, or what we call physical power — we are only strong through submission to the laws of nature. The great forces of nature are all waiting to come under our control. Gravity, heat, life, all stand ready to do our will. But this is only under the condition of the most absolute subjection to their requirements. We conquer nature easily and wholly when we submit to nature; we never conquer it at all but by submission. The astronomer reads the great laws of the planetary and stellar worlds, but the wonders of the heavens unfold to him their secrets only as he has followed the laws of light and vision in their minutest requisitions. The mystery is inscrutable until he penetrates it in the exact method which the mystery itself has decreed. The chemist traces the movements and combinations of molecular forces, and sees, and seizes, and sets at work for his own ends their marvellous adaptations, and they obey his will, but never, never in the slightest degree, do they submit themselves to his control till he has altogether submitted himself to theirs. They will do their own work at his bidding, they will enter into their own combinations in obedience to his will, they will bear his messages with the speed of the lightning, and will serve him with the gentleness of the sunlight and the resistlessness of the thunder-

bolt; but they are mute and immovable, or if they speak and move, it is for the blasting of his hopes and the destruction of himself if he seeks to turn them into any other path or to any other work than their own. The biologist bends over the mysteries of life, but if the laws of optics have been in the least disregarded in the construction of his microscope, or if any prejudice has entered his vision, determining him to see only what he wills or chooses to see, he sees nothing that is true or abiding. The investigator can open no new way. He is in pursuit of an object which he can catch only by keeping to its tracks. What wonders of invention have crowned the industry and insight of the present generation! But the inventor is only a discoverer. He has only come into something which he finds, but does not create. The adjustments which he is said to make are only those which nature herself has exactly made. Every mechanism which we call a marvel of human skill, a triumph of human ingenuity, has nothing human in it except the completeness of the human obedience which the maker of the mechanism has rendered in all its parts. Follow me says nature to man, obey me, follow me unflinchingly, obey me in everything, and all my power is at your will; following my law you shall use me altogether for your good; disobeying me you shall not use me in the least but for your destruction.

But self-mastery is greater than mastery over nature, as "he that is slow to anger is better than the mighty,

and he that ruleth his spirit, than he that taketh a city," and the growth in this power only comes through obedience. Self-control, a man's true power of sovereignty over the realm of his appetites, his passions, and his purposes, is first of all through the subjection of himself to the true law of himself. There is a law for his highest control, which the man has no more made than he has made the laws of nature, into which he must enter, under which he must place himself if he would control himself, even as he must be subject to the laws of nature if he would have nature subject unto him. Whether we call the mandate of this highest law the voice of conscience, or the voice of God in us, in either case it is the voice which so truly sounds through the very depths of our being that it constitutes personality, and is our very will itself, so that the reverently hearkening to and obeying this voice is truly a man's submission of himself to his only true self. But only he who thus loseth his life finds it again. He finds it in the very losing of it; he gains his sovereignty through his submission; he commands because he obeys. "*Ich dien*," "I serve," is the proper motto of the Prince of Wales, the heir to the British throne.

All power over himself, the control of his appetites, the curbing of his desires, the checking of every unworthy impulse, is given unto him who has this true submission to his true self. The true self requires truth in the inward parts, and when a man has the power of

perfect self-control, he has the perfect fearlessness which can never yield to falsehood. Power does not attempt to deceive. Falsehood is always from a lack of strength. To deceive another is nothing but a confession of one's own weakness. He who has gained the power of true self-mastery, the power of obedience to his inner law, the law of truth, is first of all true to himself, and therefore must be true to others.

"To thine own self be true;
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man."

But the power which comes from obedience reaches wider than this mastery over nature, and this mastery over one's self. It is only by our obedience, by the yielding of our self-wills, that we can gain any true power over others. You cannot put your will upon another will and force it in your way. You may by your superior force, your physical force, your intellectual force, secure in another an outward compliance with your commands, but every human will is in the final issue self-directed, and the choice of every man must be ultimately altogether his own. You cannot bring another unto your will except as you first put your will into his. The submission which you seek to gain you yourself must first give. I would rather wrestle with a tornado, or seek to stem a cataract just above its plunge, than to attempt a victory over a man—a real and not a seeming victory—in any other way than through his own determination.

As he who subjects nature to his use gains his power only by his own careful subjection to nature, and as he who has the true mastery over himself secures this only by yielding to the mastery of his true inner law, so he who shall master others must first of all have felt their mastery over him. The orator who sways an assembly does it only because he intelligently speaks what they have instinctively felt but could not utter. If he does not interpret to them their own deep convictions, if he undertakes to put upon them what is only his and is not truly theirs, they will not listen to him. It is the first quality of an orator that he shall put himself out of sight and be only seen by his hearers as the conscious reflection of their unconscious selves. "The power of the masters," says Ruskin, "is in their self-annihilation." We sometimes say that we like a man of strongly marked individuality, but we would never say this if we had thought about it, for it is not true. Just so far as a man's individuality hides in him those traits which we and he possess in common, we dislike him. His individuality only disgusts us. The soul to which we cleave with living ties is that in which our soul is mirrored and reproduced before us. The demagogue gains his ascendancy by yielding to the definitely formulated though ignorant clamor of the people,—an ascendancy as easily lost as won,—but the leader to whom we bow with unfailing homage has chained us to his mandate by no transient impulse and no foreign coercion, but we follow him because he has spoken the

word which had already sounded in our souls, but which to our lips was unutterable.

We do accept it; lower than the shoals
We skim this diver went, nor did create
But found it for us, deeper in our souls
Than we can penetrate.

Human hearts submit only to him who sympathizes with them and serves them.

The three most conspicuous leaders in human affairs during the last twenty-five years well illustrate — each of them — this truth. Mr. Lincoln, the first of these, became President with a reputation for honesty which prepared the people to trust him. Honest Abe Lincoln was the familiar name by which he was widest known. But that which made the nation follow him with a whole-hearted trust, such as this nation has given to no other man before or since his time, was not alone his self-renouncing and unequalled trust in the nation, — though he had this most markedly, and this was a large factor in his power, — but his self-forgetful and yet self-reverent subjection of himself to the true sovereignty of the people. He had no petty schemes of his own to carry out. He had no large plans which could not yield to larger opportunities. In entering upon his great responsibilities, it was the Union which he thought of most, as this at the time was uppermost with those who had placed him in power; but when the people, groping for vision, were reaching out for that which should reach beyond themselves, not knowing how to

find it, he saw the way, he spoke the word, he caught the inspiration of the people, and because he followed it with truth and trust, the people followed him and gave their never-equalled contribution of treasure and life at his call. He dedicated himself to the great task before him, — as he himself uttered it, in words likely to be quoted oftener and longer than any other words yet spoken in America, unless it be the opening words of the Declaration of Independence, — “that the nation shall, under God, have a new birth of freedom, and that the Government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

Mr. Gladstone is king of England in a truer sense than is any one who only wears the crown, because he stands out the best interpreter and the foremost subject of the English people's will. He began his parliamentary career as a Tory and a High Churchman, but he has become the great leader of the Liberals, because he has been willing to submit his will to what he has been able to see to be the true will of the nation. The English people themselves did not know their will. No people ever know this till some great man speaks it for them. That which was at first an instinct with the English people Mr. Gladstone has made an intelligence, and, therefore, they have made him their leader. He has seen and submitted to the unformed impulse which has been truly forming the English people, and therefore do they follow him. He is a great parliamentary orator, but so was the Earl of Beaconsfield, his late great rival; he

is a man of high moral convictions, but so is the Marquis of Salisbury, his present contestant for power. Mr. Gladstone leads the English people simply because he follows them, only seeming to go before because he is so conspicuous an example of the way in which they are really moving. He is kept as the Prime Minister of England, the first servant of the realm, because he has the true instinct of a servant which quickly catches and promptly executes his master's will.

With the two great leaders I have named, Prince Bismarck stands side by side, but his leadership, like theirs, is in the clearness with which he has seen the coming movement of his time and people, and the completeness with which he has put himself under its power. For the last fifty years the instinct of German unity under a Protestant leadership, coupled with the vague desire and sense of need of some strong power in Central Europe, has been restlessly disturbing the different German States. More than thirty years ago, in 1851, when he was Prussian Secretary at the Frankfort Diet, Bismarck saw — as his dispatches published only this last year show — what no one else then saw, the unformed impulse of the time, which told him what the coming direction of affairs should be. To this really dominant, but as yet unspoken behest, he hearkened and submitted, and his success has been due, not more to the clearness of his knowledge than to the unswerving fidelity of his obedience. "If I were no longer a Christian," he said, during the Franco-Prussian war, "I would

not remain an hour at my post. If I did not believe in a divine order which has destined this German nation for something good and great, I would at once give up the business of a diplomatist or I would not have undertaken it. Orders and titles have no charm for me. I owe the firmness which I have shown for ten years against all possible absurdities only to my decided faith. Take from me this faith, and you take from me my Fatherland." The deep saying of our Lord comes in here respecting the source of all power over men: "Verily, verily I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die it abideth alone, but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit."

3. But not only is obedience the way to wisdom and to power; growth in character has the same source. A man's character is the free disposing of his will, but freedom is inconceivable without law. Liberty is obedience. Liberty of thought is the closest conformity of thought to truth, and is the farthest removed from unrestrained license of opinion. Civil liberty is not anarchy. Liberty of the will is not unbridled arbitrariness. Perfect liberty in any sphere might be defined as perfect obedience to perfect law. Submission to authority implies freedom. The cannon ball is never said to submit to its projection. The ship tossed upon the waves, the waves driven by the storm have no submission to the forces by which they are resistlessly impelled. All natural things are subjected to and controlled by law, but nothing in nature has aught to do with submission

to law or placing itself under law. It is under law by its very nature. Indeed, what we mean by nature, the nature of anything, is nothing other than the mysterious but mighty law which governs it. I take up a drop of water on my finger, and in that tiny globe, where unseen elements have been put together in a body I can see and touch, there are locked up, the chemist tells me, forces which, if set free, could rend the mountains, but whether in the devastating fury which makes a desert of a fruitful field, or in the grateful gentleness by which the parched ground becomes a spring, these forces work according to a law which constitutes their nature, which they could no more cease to follow than they could cease to be. Nature can break no law. But man can transgress. There is something in him which can put itself athwart law, which can refuse to obey and can disobey. While in all the movements of nature, infinitely various and complicated, there is only perfect order, wildness and desolateness and terribleness being in themselves, if closely noted, only signs of a wider peace and grander harmony, in the movements of men there are strifes which do not minister to peace; there is a confusion which no law of order can resolve, there is a desolation whose dreadfulness does not diminish but enlarges as our vision of it is enlarged. In man there is found, what nowhere else appears in nature, an unalleviated disorder through an undeniable transgression. I do not seek to explain this. I do not think it can be explained; but if I should deny its truth because I

cannot see its meaning, if I should doubt its actual reality because it has no ground in reason, I should have to disregard the deepest instincts of the human soul and set aside the widest judgments of mankind and deny the good in the very terms in which I refuse to acknowledge the evil. If "evil is only good in the making," then it ceases to be evil, and in reality is then good; the distinction between good and evil thus disappears and the reality of our moral life is gone.

But if good and evil have a real meaning, then freedom is real; then man is not altogether driven by resistless forces; he is not the creature of nature controlled in the same sense and the same degree by natural law as any other creature, but he is a being equally able to submit and refuse submission to law, strangely linked in with the necessities of nature, and yet mysteriously endowed with a power which nature is powerless to control. The question of his obedience is a question of his choice. Responsibility has a meaning to him. Law and sovereignty stand before him as a personal claim upon his personal will. He can fulfil the claim or disregard it, as he chooses. The claim is a claim for his choice. It has no relevancy to anything but his choice, and choice involves in every case a double possibility, the alternative of obedience or transgression.

Now it is in this freedom that character is formed. Character is not put upon us. Even in the loose sense of the word which makes it identical with reputation, no one can give it to another. A man's repute is in

the long run only of his own making. He may suffer calumny or detraction for a time through the false-witness of others, but the only witness men will take in their final estimate of a man is the witness of his own deeds. Soon or late every man will have exactly the reputation among men which properly belongs to him, and this is not helped nor hindered by what men say about him for the time, whether in groundless praise or groundless blame. But much more is this true in the truer meaning of character. The free disposing of a man, which is truly character, must be his alone. Temptation, environment, habit, may solicit choice in one direction rather than another, but no man chooses by compulsion, and even any man is tempted only when he is led away by his own lusts and enticed. Hence the claim to obedience, to that unwavering obedience which is the informing law of a strong character, should be made by every man upon himself. The first claim and the last claim upon him is that he should obey. He is never too old to obey. He needs to feel the bond of a personal authority all the while. His growth in wisdom and his growth in power may come from an obedience to a law which does not in his thoughts center in the mandate of a personal sovereign, but his growth in character is not only a personal growth, but a growth through obedience to a consciously recognized person. No general claim of duty, no impersonal obligation of the right, is sufficient for the truly dutiful or upright character. The Confucian ethics

are pure and lofty, but they lead to neither pure nor lofty lives. Precepts of living may teach us perfectly how to live, but only life itself can conduct us into life. We need to know God, we need to worship Him, we need to offer our wills in free and full submission to His will, if we would have any strong and healthy growth in character,—if we would have opened in our souls a well-spring of life, welling up to everlasting life. God's sovereignty is the exhaustless fountain of life; obedience to Him is the endless exercise of life. "And he shewed me a pure river of water of life clear as crystal proceeding out of the THRONE of God and of the Lamb."

GENTLEMEN OF THE SENIOR CLASS:—For the last three hundred years there has been steadily growing in the civilized world a disposition to assert the individual will above the restraints of authority. Your historical studies have made you familiar with this growth, whose prodigious proportions at the present day are evident to every one. The strongest governments of Europe have a sense of weakness and insecurity which they have never felt before. The expenditure in our time of police and military force to preserve the existing institutions of authority from overthrow by violence, is unparalleled in any time. European governments have never required and have never possessed such great armies and such an omnipresent police force seeking also to make itself omniscient and omnipotent as now. Four weeks ago to-day, the Czar of all the Russias was

crowned with unprecedented pomp and splendor, but also with an extent of military guardianship of which no Czar had ever felt the need before. The world waited in wonder whether all the mighty preparations for his defence would yet suffice to save him. "Uneasy rests the head that wears a crown;"—never so true as in our day.

In this country the signs of the prevailing tendency in which Europe finds such dire forebodings are only too apparent. We began our national career with the declaration that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, and the war of secession threatened us with anarchy because eight millions of the people of the South, appealing to this utterance, refused their consent to the government of the Union. It cost us an untold expenditure of blood and treasure to deny our original declaration, and to declare instead that governments derive their just powers from justice, which determines that to which the people ought to consent quite as truly as that to which they have consented. We have not been wanting since the war in the disposition to cast off authority and to make the individual self-will dominant in every issue. Two of our Presidents have been shot by assassins. Men of high position insist upon their right, when the time comes, to take the law, as they term it, into their own hands. A member of the present Congress has just now been on trial for murder, because he sought by blood his own redress for a fancied wrong. The war upon prop-

erty and the family—the two institutions upon which the very existence of society depends—is as evident in America as in Europe. The war against property would seem to have larger proportions there than here, but it may be doubted whether the disintegrating forces at work upon the family have anywhere such magnitude as with us. I am not apt to take a despondent view of the world's condition, or of the promise of our American life, as you well know. I look upon our national prospect with large hope. Never before, it seems to me, has so bright a future shone to the eyes of any people. But there is never a privilege without its peril, and we have dangers which, if wise, we shall not fail to see. Our chief peril,—and there are signs enough which show it to be grave,—consists, I think, in the undue exaltation of our liberty. We have set the Goddess of Liberty upon the dome of our Capitol at Washington as though liberty was the presiding genius in all our law. We are preparing to erect at the entrance of New York harbor a colossal statue of Liberty, whose uplifted torch shall proclaim to incoming fleets of all the nations that it is liberty which is to enlighten the world. We boast that we are a free people, but who speaks with pride of the supremacy of our law? We make our law dependent on our liberty, in other words, we are determined to have such laws as we will, rather than to will such laws as we ought to have. But when liberty is put first, and only the law is permitted which we choose to permit, the liberty soon sinks to a license, and the license

descends into anarchy, and the anarchy only issues in a despotism. Only when the liberty is made dependent upon the law; only when the law comes first, and the people ask not what we will, but what we should obey, is there any true or abiding liberty. Then the law becomes the life of which liberty is the spontaneous fruit; mercy and truth have then met together, righteousness and peace have then kissed each other.

I wish to encourage you, gentlemen, to face the great peril of our future with great hope. "They that be for us are more than they that be against us." But the strength of your courage and the success of your endeavors will come not at all from any optimistic view of our national prospects or of human affairs, but altogether from the strength of your obedience, and the success with which you lead others to obey. I counsel you to employ all the growth in wisdom and power and character which you have gained and are still to increase through your obedience, in the effort to make more evident the supremacy of law, the authority of righteousness, the unqualified sovereignty of the family and the State,—each in its sphere,—and the headship and lordship over all of the Son of God, who has the authority to execute judgment also, "because he is the Son of man." All that you possess of good is not too precious to be laid upon this altar. "None of us liveth to himself and no man dieth unto himself." Your own self-surrender, your complete commitment to truth and righteousness and God, so that none shall ever question your integrity or self-

forgetfulness, will be a flame to kindle others also, and what you might fail to gain by all your words will give you the joy of its full accomplishment through your obedient lives. I join the joy of what you have been to us in your college life with the hope of what you are to be, and I find in the manly devotion which has characterized you so conspicuously as a class in all your course here, in the vigor of your moral purpose and the strength of your Christian faith, the promise of your continued increase in wisdom, power, and character, and in favor with God and man. May you have that union with God which will give you the only perfect fellowship with man, and gain even in, and not alone after, your service the crown of everlasting life; "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God, angels, and authorities and powers being made subject unto him!" Amen.

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